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ABSTRACT

A science fiction unit on space designed for secondary schools is described and advocated in this article. This experimental program, presented to 9th grade students at University High School, State University of Iowa, provides a highly imaginative experience in literature while raising unique philosophical and moral problems not found in other categories of literature. The author presents a detailed program with specific course objectives. Major goals include an understanding of science fiction literary techniques and a comprehension of scientific concepts. A list of science fiction books rated for their merit is included with a discussion of criteria used in their selection. Reference to other genres of science fiction material is also made. (RL)

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"That Starlit Corridor"

Alan L. Madsen

Science fiction is prose worthy of serious study, declares this writer. Mr. Madsen, who teaches English at University High School, State University of Iowa, writes of his ninth graders' venture into "that starlit corridor" and rates the books they read on a scale of poor to outstanding.

What makes us rove that starlit corridor
May be the impulse to meet face to face
Our vice and folly shaped into a thing,
And so at last ourselves; what lures us there
Is simpler versions of disaster;
A web confounding time and space,
A world of ocean without shore,
A sentence to perpetual journeying,
And simplest, flapping down the poisoned
air,
A ten-clawed monster.[1]

— Kingsley Amis

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WHAT LURES us into the starlit corridor of science fiction? Perhaps for the oldsters it is a desire to come face to face with projections of our vice and folly. But youngsters are compelled by other motives. They want excitement, adventure, idealistic quests, and a chance to exercise creative imaginations.

Adolescents are dreamers. They read to find out about themselves as they might be, in a world as it may be, shaped, in part, by themselves as they would be. Adolescents are imaginative, much more so than adults conditioned to patterns and habits of their daily routine. Adolescents have not lost the zest for exploration and discovery. They have yet to use their creative imaginations to erect a world of the twenty-first century, surpassing the world of their parents and grandparents, always a world better than they now know.

If Kingsley Amis is right, most readers of science fiction range in age from 16 to 28. The appeal of science fiction therefore is not confined to adolescents. Moreover, science fiction readers are at an age at which, according to psychologists, man does his most creative thinking. This fact alone might justify the study of science fiction in junior and senior high English classes. But it need not.

How many English teachers have observed, in free reading periods for example, that many brighter youngsters habitually read science fiction with something approximating religious zeal? And

[1]From *New Maps of Hell*, © 1960, by Kingsley Amis. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.

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how many of us have dismissed science fiction as trash without really knowing anything about it or, on the other hand, have shrunk away from it mumbling, "I don't know anything about science"? *Science fiction* has been for the most part a pejorative term, a wastebasket classification for any bad fiction writing larded with scientific jargon.

Arno Jewett's current assessment of the genre probably reflects the dominant thinking of high school English teachers:

> My experience with books on science fiction has been that most of the plots are contrived, the characters stereotyped, and the content badly written. Frankly I have my doubts about the literary value of most science fiction and the usefulness of it in high school literature courses. Most of it is in the same class as mediocre westerns and murder mysteries.[2]

Mr. Jewett's observation is valid for much science fiction being written today. But it applies most accurately to science fiction of a dozen or more years ago. Today we have a steadily growing body of substantial and literary science fiction and a core of talented science fiction writers: e.g., George Orwell, Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Henry Kuttner, Clifford Simak, and Theodore Sturgeon.

Greatest Fiction of Ideas

These men consistently open corridors to the imagination where fantasy, myth, utopia, and anti-utopia converge, overlap, and disjoin again into distinct and individual types. On an idea level, the genre is saturated with assumptions and speculations which teachers of the humanities have neglected to treat in high school: the relationship of science, technology, and space travel to human values. Mr. Bradbury states the importance of studying the ideas contained in science fiction accordingly:

> Using dramatic and suspenseful frameworks, the writers can put forward, in symbolic terms, some of their best thinking on a philosophical-political-sociological-psychological level. It is indeed, I repeat, the only, the best, the greatest FICTION OF IDEAS. And since we live in a Society of Ideas on the loose, running wild in our machineries, it is time we paid attention to 180 million men and women dominated or shaped in one way or another by these s-f devices.[3]

Still, Mr. Jewett's previous estimate is a good one and suggests a responsibility English teachers should accept for helping students develop critical standards. It is unthinkable in this space age that many of us in English refuse to learn something about science, refuse to find out how science fiction writers go about their work, and refuse to learn what science fiction writers have to say about the future and mankind's place in it. Let me invoke Mr. Amis on this point of view: ". . . There is at present a discreditable provincialism of thought and too much nervous or complacent reluctance to invoke ordinary critical standards. Science fiction is not tomfool sensationalism, but neither is it a massive body of serious art destined at any moment to engulf the whole of Anglo-American writing."[4]

Where does a teacher start on such a unit? One method is the approach I took in developing a space science fiction unit for ninth grade students in University High School at the State University of Iowa.

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[2]Letter to the author, Dec. 10, 1963. In a subsequent letter, dated Feb. 3, 1964, Mr. Jewett suggests that the following statement, coupled with the paragraph above, gives a more accurate reflection of his views: "The best fiction by Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein, Jules Verne and a few others are well worth reading for entertainment. And certainly Gore Vidal's play *Visit to a Small Planet* is excellent for use in high school literature courses."

[3]Letter to the author, Dec. 1, 1963.

[4]Amis, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

Variety Is Keynote

I began by sampling a wide range of science fiction novels and short stories. They vary stylistically among themselves as much as other types of literature. It is interesting to compare, for example, Ray Bradbury's sentimentality with Frederik Pohl's cynicism, or Theodore Sturgeon's unusual styling with the "square as Sears and Roebuck" styling of Robert Heinlein. In subject matter these writers run the spectrum from colonization of other planets to studies in telepathy; from a treatment of symbiosis to legal problems of planet ownership; from twenty-second century crusades to technicalities of space navigation. No one could catalogue the variety of ingenuity displayed.

Next, I turned to historical-critical studies. There are many more of these available than I would have guessed. To mention a few (all of which are listed in the 1964 edition of *Books In Print*):[5]

1. Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1960; also a Ballantine paperback).
2. G. D. Doherty, ed. *Aspects of Science Fiction*, (New York: Transatlantic Arts, Inc.)
3. Roger Lanclyn Green, *Into Other Worlds* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, Ltd., 1958).
4. Sam Moskowitz, *Explorers of the Infinite, Shapers of Science Fiction*, (Cleveland, World Publishing Co., 1963).

Other readable studies include a few which are no longer in print. *Modern Science Fiction* (1953, Coward-McCann, Inc.) edited by Reginald Bretnor, although a somewhat dated work, is a collection of essays by writers and critics who explore several facets of science fiction: movies, social science, morals and religion, and science fiction as it relates to the main stream of literature. Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke are represented in this volume. Another collection by science fiction writers is *The Science Fiction Novel* (Advent Publishers, 1959). These essays (by writers such as Robert A. Heinlein and Alfred Bester) were first delivered as lectures at the University of Chicago and later collected as a volume in memorium to C. M. Kornbluth.

I now felt ready to formulate my goals and objectives for the unit. In general, the purposes of the unit were to distinguish science fiction from other forms of literature, to build standards for evaluating well-written and poorly written science fiction, and to determine the value of the contents of science fiction for contemporary adolescent readers.

More specifically, the goals which I established for the unit were the following:

1. To understand and apply present concepts of time and space to science fiction in order to read critically and intelligently.
2. To understand that any science fiction work is based on and, circumscribed by, one or more scientific hypotheses.
3. To learn to recognize conventions native to science fiction and to judge whether or not these conventions are justified.
4. To understand the uses of extrapolation to predict, warn, or provide a colorful setting.
5. To recognize that all authors make certain sociological, political, economic, psychological, moral, and religious assumptions about life and to note some of the major assumptions of this kind current in science fiction writing such as:
   a. Individualism will be extinguished and future societies will be governed by totalitarian states.
   b. Man's basic nature can be changed for the better if he is

[5] I am indebted to Robert Goetzman, fellow-teacher at University High School, for much of the bibliographical information for this paper.

placed in a superior scientific-technological environment of the future (the inverse is also prevalent in science fiction).

c. Colonization on other planets constitutes an extension of the American western frontier, a second chance, or a new beginning.

6. To learn to ask certain critical questions about plot, character, setting, in order to make a final estimate of the work:

Plot

a. Is the plot hackneyed or contrived? Is it merely "soap opera" or western but set on a different planet?
b. Does the plot follow as a natural consequence from a realistic hypothetical base, extrapolated from a tendency in the present?
c. Does the plot have an organic relationship to character and setting?

Character

a. Are the characters mechanically produced types, or are they individuals exhibiting genuine emotions and feelings whose actions and thoughts are consistent with the demands of plot and setting?
b. Is character the focal point or does character tend to be subordinate to plot and setting or disappear in favor of marvelous scientific inventions and melodramatic events?

Setting

a. Does the setting provide a functional relationship to other elements?
b. Does it demand the suspension of the reader's judgment against the incredible, such as mechanical monsters and biological-anthropological throwbacks?
c. Does the setting merely provide a place of escape from problems which appear to be unsolved on earth?

Final Estimate

a. Does the author sacrifice people and ideas in favor of events and things?
b. Does he appear to offer a reader cheap thrills and panaceas in place of genuine creative imagination and thought-provoking ideas?
c. What are his assumptions about life and the nature of mankind? Are they valid? Or are they based on stock values and attitudes which are convenient for his present purpose?

In formulating objectives of this kind and in selecting the material to accomplish these ends, a teacher may encounter several problems: (1) how to distinguish science fiction from fantasy, myth, utopian, and anti-utopian literature; (2) what ideas and assumptions contained in science fiction merit most careful examination; (3) what critical standards to bring to bear on science fiction conventions and stylistic devices; and (4) how to choose a common reading as a basis of departure for the unit.

I had written to a number of science fiction writers and to two critics of the genre, soliciting their opinions on the above problems. Their responses were informative as well as encouraging. Mr. Bradbury outlined some excellent sources of information and provided a great many insights into science fiction.

Common reading texts suggested by these authors included *The Martian Chronicles*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *Golden Apples of the Sun* by Ray Bradbury; *The Caves of Steel* by Isaac Asimov; *The Deep Range* and *Childhood's End* by Arthur C. Clarke; *The Winds of Time* by Chad Oliver; *Door into Summer*, *Farmer in the Sky*, *Starman Jones* and

others by Robert Heinlein. Although all of these contain much to recommend them, each teacher will have his favorite; consequently, I selected *The Martian Chronicles.*

Criteria for Selection

My criteria for selecting this novel were five: (1) Bradbury's sensibility is a romantic one, highly appealing to adolescents; (2) the novel is one of the most literary representatives of that class of science fiction which treats the effects of man's interaction with inhabitants of other planets; (3) the novel requires a great deal of active, imaginative participation on the part of the reader, for he has to supply events for time gaps, he has to follow a thematic—almost musical—development rather than a standard plot line, and he has ample opportunity to speculate about the future and is invited to measure himself against the standards of the book; (4) it provides an excellent place of departure for extensive individual reading in related science fiction, myth, fantasy, and utopian literature; (5) the book, in one sense a series of short stories, is such that any reader of junior or senior high may enter into it at his own level of experience and ability.

The *Chronicles* record, episodically, man's colonizations of Mars from 1999 to 2026, the time at which both the civilizations of Mars and Earth have been destroyed. At the end of the novel only two earth families, who become the "last Martians," remain, Adam and Eve-like, to begin civilization anew. While earthmen disappear in an atomic war, Martians ironically become infected with chickenpox, a disease unknown on Mars.

Although Bradbury uses standard science fiction devices of mental telepathy, mass hypnosis, and the like, these devices function for his moral probings and his humanistic ends. The focus is always on humanity, not gadgetry. He counterpoints human and Martian attitudes, he inverts cherished values, and he reverses cliches (Martians believe there is too much oxygen on Earth to sustain life) to achieve his aims. Moreover, he attacks everything from racial prejudice to commercialism, from bureaucracy to technology, and from fratricide to the stifling of creative imagination. And throughout he raises important philosophical questions, e.g., "What is sanity?"

For those who wish to unearth them, there is an abundance of literary nuggets. First, there is Bradbury's style, which is alternately as journalistic in homely detail as Defoe's and as symbolical-allegorical as Hawthorne's. Second, there is the sensitivity Bradbury displays to sense experience which manifests itself best in color imagery: blues and greens, moonlight, fire, gold, and silver. Third, Bradbury uses mythical themes and archetypal figures (the Johnny Appleseed figure, the creation theme in "Usher II," the exodus theme in which Negroes migrate in mass from earth to Mars). Fourth, there are the structural and thematic means by which Bradbury unifies the novel: a cycle of history in which there is a muted hope for the phoenix rising again, the mounting of themes for a cumulative view of the destructive element in man, and the interweaving of "other worldly" motifs such as the doppelgänger.

Bradbury's novel was the focal point of the common reading in the unit, and it was the means by which students were introduced to extensive individual reading in science fiction. Students were divided into groups to examine other works from the points of view with which we had examined Bradbury's novel: content, imagination, and literary quality. At a later date the groups reported their findings to the class.

A "Ladder" of Suggestions

I provided students with the following sample "reading ladder" and asked that

all groups include in their reading one or more science fiction novels of poorer quality. The list below is a modification of the reading ladders for adolescents, long advocated by Dora V. Smith. Based on the criteria of the experience of the reader and the literary value of the book, the scale ranges from works of high literary merit—V—down to those of questionable value—I. This list was created for ninth-graders. For older or younger readers, changes in the ladder would be necessary. Some teachers will undoubtedly question the wisdom of my classifications, and I confess to an extremely subjective point of view in making the selections. The best single guide to literary quality of a book is still the author's name.

SAMPLE READING LADDER

V

George Orwell	*1984*
Aldous Huxley	*Brave New World*
H. F. Heard	*Doppelgängers*
C. S. Lewis	*Perelandra Trilogy* *Out of the Silent Planet* *Perelandra* *That Hideous Strength*
Ray Bradbury	*Fahrenheit 451* *Dandelion Summer*
Walter M. Miller	*A Canticle for Leibowitz*
Arthur C. Clarke	*Childhood's End*
Olaf Stapledon	*First and Last Men* *The Star Maker*
Theodore Sturgeon	*More Than Human*

IV

Jules Verne	*The Mysterious Island* *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* *The Island of Dr. Moreau*
H. G. Wells	*Time Machine* *War of the Worlds*
Robert Heinlein	*Sixth Column* *Stranger in a Strange Land*
Edwin Balmer and Philip Wylie	*When Worlds Collide* *After Worlds Collide*
Ray Bradbury	*Golden Apples of the Sun*
Fritz Leiber	*Gather, Darkness!*

III

Isaac Asimov	*Foundation Trilogy* *Foundation* *Foundation and Empire* *Second Foundation* *I, Robot* *The Caves of Steel*
Robert A. Heinlein	*Revolt in 2100* *The Puppet Masters*
Jack London	*The Scarlet Plague*
Madeline L'Engle	*A Wrinkle in Time*
James Blish	*A Case of Conscience*
Arthur C. Clarke	*Sands of Mars*

II

Robert A. Heinlein	*Starman Jones* *Farmer in the Sky* *Tunnel in the Sky* (and a number of others)
Murray Leinster	*Talents, Inc.*
Poul Anderson	*The High Crusade*
Arthur C. Clarke	*Dolphin Island*

I

In general, the work of the following writers:

Edgar Rice Burroughs
Andre Norton
Hugh Walters
Ellen MacGregor
Thomas Galt

Harry Stine
Alan Nourse
Lester Del Rey

Besides Bradbury's novel, in-class prose reading included short stories by Alfred Bester and Arthur C. Clarke as well as a long essay, "When Time Began," in which Fred Hoyle explains in relatively simple terms the three current theories of the universe. I selected the latter to provide a scientific foundation for some of the problems which occur in science fiction.[6] If a reader accepts the premise that one can travel in space, he is obligated to test the internal logic of the novel which produces subsequent events. That is to say, in addition to the literary criteria one ordinarily brings to a novel, science fiction requires that the reader test the nature of the logic of the scientific hypotheses involved. If, for example, a novelist "tesseracts" his characters to another planet, or if the characters get there through "hyperdrive," or if they must make a "transition" in space, what does this imply about the author's understanding of his material? For a great many science fiction novelists, these terms are merely excuses for not providing an acceptable scientific *raison d'etre*.

Though science fiction, as the second of these terms indicates, is a prose medium, I also incorporated poetry, a radio broadcast, and two plays into the unit.

The only two volumes of poetry to treat science are *Imagination's Other Place, Poems of Science and Mathematics* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1955) edited by Helen Plotz, and *The Space Child's Mother Goose* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1956; also, Essandes Paperback) by Frederick Windsor and Marian Parry.

The first of these includes a number of poems which, though they do not extrapolate in the way that fiction does, explore man's reaction to contemporary science—both his hopes and his fears. The second volume is a delightfully humorous collection of verses employing figures (and verse form) from Mother Goose. The characters are depicted in terms of contemporary scientific concepts and with appropriate terminology. The following is typical of Windsor's book:

> Probable-Possible, my black hen,
> She lays eggs in the Relative When.
> She doesn't lay eggs in the Positive Now
> Because she's unable to Postulate How.

I might add parenthetically that a great many of the selections in this volume are much too difficult except for the most scientifically sophisticated reader, even though the book contains a glossary of scientific terms.

The radio broadcast and the two plays might be considered as a sub-unit within the science fiction unit. Of chief concern here was drama as it embodied many of the same techniques, concepts, and ideas found in science fiction. Discussion and examination of dramatic technique itself came into consideration only as it seemed revelant or peculiar to a special means of presentation: radio, television, movie, or stage.

We listened to Orson Welles' 1938 broadcast based on H. G. Wells' novel, *War of the Worlds*, in which aliens from Mars invade earth. We also read Karel Capek's play *R. U. R.* (Rossum's Universal Robots), as well as Gore Vidal's play *Visit to a Small Planet*.

The radio broadcast, some twenty-five years later, has lost much of its dramatic punch for adolescents conditioned to a space age, but the broadcast can be highly effective for presenting early ideas about science fiction. Of course, the BEM (bug-eyed monster) of Wells' novel became the prototype for almost three decades of science fiction. Students were quick to note in the broadcast the heavy

[6]This is contrary to Peter Lamb's belief that knowledge of science is unnecessary. See Lamb's article "Race to the Moon," *English Journal*, 46 (November 1957), pp. 503-5.

emphasis upon the sensational aspects of science fiction.

I selected *R. U. R.*, which depicts robots in revolt from their creators, to show students early conceptions of robots (Capek coined the term "robot") from which are derived a great many present-day notions of robots and robotry.[7] More important than this, however, is the fact that *R. U. R.* provides a good connecting link between science fiction and utopian literature, since the play treats themes found in science fiction and a great many utopian novels. In particular we noted Capek's concern with the dehumanization of man through science and technology. Our discussions provoked some students to read such utopian novels as *Erewhon*, *News From Nowhere*, and *Walden Two*.

Reading Vidal's play, *Visit to a Small Planet*, was one of the most enjoyable experiences in the unit. It presented an important aspect of much good science fiction: humorous treatment of serious themes. Vidal gives us his genial satire through the character of Kreton, the visitor from a future time zone who has for his hobby our own particular, "primitive" time period.

Imaginative Writing

A science fiction unit may lend itself to a great variety of writing activities, but my concern was with giving students an opportunity to express themselves creatively. Consequently, I asked students to write a story based on an incident, assumption, situation, or idea contained in *The Martian Chronicles*.

Since a great many of Bradbury's individual Chronicles are not developed beyond a generalization (such as "The old people were the last to come to Mars."), some students chose to particularize the generalization. Their fundamental problem was this: If we accept as true Bradbury's generalization or assumption, what will happen if we push it to its logical conclusion in concrete form? This, of course, allows a great deal of latitude for individual interpretation.

One boy did an admirable job of extending a Chronicle in which Negroes are preparing for a mass exodus to Mars. Bradbury does not show us what happened after the Negroes arrived; the student does. Some of the best stories came from students who worked on an idea or problem implicit but not explicit in the Chronicles. For example, one boy wrote an ingenious story in which a Martian is tried according to the civil laws of earth for an act which does not violate Martian legal or moral codes.

Not only does this kind of writing afford adolescents a chance to be imaginative, but it provides inexperienced writers with a basic structure from which to write, since students were asked to follow Bradbury's Martian setting, his concept of a Martian, and other fixed elements. Those who chose to be imaginative in all respects—by not writing within the framework of Bradbury's novel—produced the least successful stories.

A teacher of humanities rarely has at his disposal a strictly empirical means by which to evaluate the results of his teaching. He may examine students for the extent to which they have assimilated the facts and concepts he has presented to them; but his best index to results is the degree to which he has motivated students to seek imaginative experiences with literature and acquainted them with new instruments for cognition.

Though I make no plea that science fiction replace the classics of literature in high school English courses, I do claim that science fiction provides a unique kind of imaginative medium which raises philosophical problems man has always faced, as well as problems peculiar to man in a space age.

[7] See Isaac Asimov's novels of robots in particular.

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